Flu: What You Can Do

Caring for People at Home

For more information, please visit:

www.mass.gov/dph/flu

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What is the flu?

Seasonal flu ("the flu") is caused by a virus that infects your lungs, nose, and throat and makes you sick. Flu season starts in early winter, and continues through early spring every year. The flu comes on very quickly and makes you feel very sick. Most people will feel better within a week.

Symptoms include:

- Fever
- Tiredness/weakness
- Severe muscle and joint aches
- Dry cough
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Runny/stuffy nose

A flu pandemic is caused by a new virus. It is different from the seasonal flu because:

- Many people around the world could get sick at the same time.
- People could get sick at any time of year.

The most important thing to know about a flu pandemic is that the symptoms people have and the way you care for someone who is sick are very similar to the seasonal flu.

What is the common cold?

The **common cold** is caused by germs that affect your nose more than any other part of your body.

Symptoms include:

- Stuffy nose
- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Sore throat
- Wet cough

WHAT IS THE FLU?

Is it a cold or is it the flu?

KEY DIFFERENCES	
WITH A COLD:	WITH THE FLU:
You almost never have a fever.	You have a fever.
You feel stuffiness in your head.	Your entire body feels sick.
You feel a little sick.	You feel very sick.
You can have a cold any time of year.	You can have the flu starting in early winter and continuing through early spring.
There is no shot to protect you.	You can get a shot to protect yourself.

How do people get the flu?

Flu spreads easily from person to person. When people with the flu cough or sneeze, the flu virus is in the wet spray that comes out of their nose and mouth.

- If you are near them, you can breathe in the virus and get sick.
- The flu virus also gets on things you touch like doorknobs, phones, and toys. After touching these objects, the virus can infect you when you touch your mouth, nose, or eyes.

Lower your chances of getting & spreading the flu:

- Get a flu shot every year to prevent the flu!
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. If you don't have a tissue, cough into your inner elbow.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Use a household cleaner to clean things that are touched often like:
  - » Door and refrigerator handles
  - » Computer keyboards/mouse
  - » Phones
  - » Kids' toys
- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Keep about 3 to 6 feet between yourself and other people.
- If you are sick, stay home. You can spread the flu even if you feel better.
  - » Adults can spread the flu for about 5 days.
  - » Kids can spread the flu for 7 days.
- If you are breastfeeding your baby and have the flu, you might want to wear a facemask so your baby doesn't get sick.

Get a flu shot every year!

Anyone who wants to lower their chances of getting the flu or giving it to someone else should get a flu shot every year.

! Pneumonia can be a serious side effect of the flu. Ask your doctor if you also should get a pneumonia shot.

Some of us are more likely to have problems if we get the flu, so it's very important to get a flu shot every year. This includes:

- Children 6 months through 18 years old
- People 50 years of age or older
- Pregnant women
- People with certain health problems like diabetes, asthma, or heart disease

Talk to your doctor about getting a shot if you have other health problems.

Also, it is extra important to get a flu shot if you live with or take care of:

- Children younger than 5 years old
- People 50 years of age or older
- Pregnant women
- People with certain health problems

How to take care of someone with the flu:

When someone has the flu they feel very sick and tired. They feel achy, have a fever, and may get dehydrated. Here are signs and symptoms you can look for, and ways you can help someone feel better.

Fever is a common symptom of the flu. It can come on suddenly and last for 3 to 5 days.

- A fever is a higher body temperature than normal. It is measured using a thermometer.
- Temperatures can be measured by:
  - » Rectum (bottom)
  - » Ear
  - » Mouth
  - » Armpit
- Talk to your doctor about the different types of thermometers you can use, and which one will work best for you and your family members.
  - » Digital thermometers are much safer than glass. Glass thermometers can break easily, and the mercury in them is very dangerous.

YOU SHOULD CALL A DOCTOR ABOUT A FEVER WHEN:

AGE:	TEMPERATURE:
Under 3 months old	Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher
3 months to 5 years old	Fever of 102°F (38.9°C) or higher
Over 5 years old	Fever of 104°F (40°C) or higher

! **If a person of any age has a fever for more than 3 days, you should call a doctor.**

You can buy these at most stores and pharmacies.

Use medicine that is right for the person's age.

Follow label instructions very carefully.

There are a few ways to treat a fever and make someone feel more comfortable:

- Give fever-reducing medicines like:
  - » Acetaminophen (Tylenol® or store brand)
  - » Ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®, or store brand)
  - » Aspirin (Bayer® or store brand)
- Keep the room comfortably cool.
- Make sure they are wearing light-weight clothing.
- Have them drink fluids, especially water.
- Consider sponging them with lukewarm water if they have a high fever.

! Never give aspirin to children 18 and younger unless it is recommended by a doctor. It can cause a dangerous illness called Reye's Syndrome.

! Doctors say we should not use alcohol rubs or cold water baths to bring a fever down. Alcohol can be absorbed through the skin and make a child sick. Cold water can cause shivering and make the bad effects of the fever worse.

Dehydration can happen when you lose more water than you take in. You lose water when you sweat and even when you breathe. If you do not drink enough, or if you have a fever, diarrhea or vomiting, you can become dehydrated. Dehydration can be a serious problem – especially for small children, the elderly, and people with some illnesses.

Common symptoms of dehydration are:

- Feeling thirsty
- Having a dry mouth
- Peeing less than usual
- Pee that looks darker than usual
- Dizziness
- Headache

To prevent dehydration:

- Drink plenty of fluids like:
  - » Water
  - » Fruit or vegetable juices
  - » Soups (chicken soup) and broths
  - » Gatorade® (or store brand) for adults
  - » Pedialyte® (or store brand) for kids
- Don't drink caffeine or alcohol.
- Keep drinks the sick person likes close to them so that they can take small sips often.
- Continue breastfeeding a child who is nursing.

Body aches are also symptoms of the flu. It is normal for a person with the flu to feel weak, tired, and achy. It is also normal to have a headache, a sore throat, dry cough, or a stuffy nose.

To help reduce their body aches, headaches, and tiredness you may want to:

- Give them medicine. The same medicine you give them for a fever will also help with their other symptoms.
- Help change their position in bed when they are awake.
- Help them get out of bed to take a short walk around the room (only 2 or 3 times each day).
- Make sure it's quiet and calm so they can rest and relax.

To help with a stuffy nose, sore throat, and dry cough you may want to:

- Use a clean cool-mist humidifier or steam from a hot shower or bath. This helps keep the nose and throat moist.
- Ask anyone who smokes not to smoke in the house.
- Use breathing strips for people having trouble breathing through their nose. Be sure to follow package instructions.
- Use a saline spray or saltwater rinse in the nose. Only do this for older children and adults.
- Have them sit up or keep their head raised to help reduce stuffiness. Crib mattresses and children's beds also can be raised slightly.
- Gargle with salt water several times a day to help reduce a sore throat or cough. To make salt water, mix ½ teaspoon of salt in 8 ounces of water.

If you are pregnant, or if you have a health problem like diabetes, asthma, or heart disease, it is important to call your doctor when the first flu symptoms appear. Your health condition could be made worse by the flu.

Call a doctor if someone:

- Has a fever that lasts more than 3 days
- Has a fever or cough that goes away for 24 hours or more and then returns
- Has a fever with:
  - » a stiff neck
  - » a very bad headache
  - » a severe sore throat
  - » an earache
  - » a rash
- Has less pee or dark pee
- Has green, brown-colored, or bloody mucus that comes up when they cough
- Has severe vomiting or vomits for a long time
- Has difficulty drinking or taking a bottle
- Is very fussy or sleepy (infants and children)
- Has any other unusual symptoms or concerns
- Has not gotten better after a week

Call 911 for an emergency if someone:

- Is having trouble breathing – breathing is very fast, difficult, or painful
- Is having chest pain
- Is confused or unaware of their surroundings
- Is unable to wake up
- Has changes in their speech, or speaks in a way you can't understand
- Can't walk or sit up
- Has skin that is bluish or gray in color
- Has a seizure (uncontrolled twitching or shaking)

How to prepare before you get sick:

Build a **Flu Care Kit** filled with the supplies you'll need if you get sick.

Keep the following supplies at home to use in case someone gets the flu. Get these supplies before you or someone you care for gets sick. It can be hard to find the time or energy to go to the store to buy what you need when someone is sick.

- A digital thermometer
- Non-aspirin medicines like:
  - » Acetaminophen (Tylenol® or store brand)
  - » Ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®, or store brands, etc.)
- Drinks – like water, fruit juice, soups, and sports drinks
- Soap and alcohol-based hand gel

- Food that is easy to digest (crackers, oatmeal, rice, etc.)
- Extra supply of food, medicine, or equipment for those with special needs
- Cleaning supplies – household disinfectant, paper towels, trash bags
- The name and phone number of the family doctor

Check the expiration dates on all your supplies every 6 months.

Keep useful information handy. These forms will help you to be prepared for flu season...

My flu care information:

Doctor's name and phone number: _____

_____

Pharmacy phone number: _____

Phone number of family or friends available to help when needed: _____

_____

MEDICINES THAT YOU OR FAMILY MEMBERS TAKE REGULARLY		
FAMILY MEMBER:	MEDICINE:	DOSE:

ALLERGIES THAT YOU OR FAMILY MEMBERS HAVE	
FAMILY MEMBER:	ALLERGY:

SPECIAL DIETS THAT YOU OR FAMILY MEMBERS FOLLOW	
FAMILY MEMBER:	SPECIAL DIETS:

Summary for your doctor:

Reason you are calling: _____

Symptoms of patient: _____

How long has the patient been sick? _____

Age of patient: _____

PATIENT'S TEMPERATURE		
TEMPERATURE:	TIME TAKEN:	HOW TAKEN:

Does the patient have any of the following?
(circle yes or no)

Breathing problems: YES NO

Vomiting: YES NO

Drinking fluids: YES NO

Eating normally: YES NO

Sleeping normally: YES NO

Travel in last 10 days: YES NO

Pregnant: YES NO

Anyone else sick: YES NO

What has been done to treat the illness?

_____
_____
_____
_____

List other health problems:

_____
_____
_____
_____

List medicines for other illnesses or health problems:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

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Massachusetts Department of Public Health

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